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Poetics of Power and Construction of Gender Identity in Selected Published Ethiopian Children's Stories

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Abstract

This study explores the poetics of power and construction of gender identity in Ethiopian Children's Literature. The data for the investigation are published children's literature in Amharic selected based on the motifs they embody and reoccurrence of the values pertaining to relations of power and gender identity. The analysis reveals embodiment of fixed power structure which inculcates passivity and normalize class structure by imposing hierarchical and oppressive system of symbolic governance. The construction of gender identity in the texts appears to be conflicted and is influenced by the discourse of power. Cognition, tactical, muscular power and authority are attributes of male characters.

Keywords: Poetics of power; Gender identity; Children's literature; Ideology; Ethiopia

1. Introduction

Children's literature is considered to be a site where cultural and sociopolitical discourses are constructed and imparted from adults to children. It is implicated with rhetoric of power circulating among adult population as it is produced based on notions in a culture about what is thought to be fit for children.

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As a result, children's literature has powerful impact which can last a lifetime. Its impact is derived from the fact that it embeds dominant cultural stereotypes influencing sensibilities of children. Burke and Copenhaver emphasizes that serious considerations have to be made about children's literature and the way they shape children by stating, "[t]hose lessons learned earlier are the most difficult to alter. We need to stop thinking about children's books as child's play and acknowledge that the body of children's literature reflects contentious issues that reside at the core of our culture" [1]. It is the recognition of the appropriating power of children's literature which has led to these scholars' call to be serious about children's literature.

Indeed, children's literature does not present voices of the children attuned to their needs, emotions and experiences. Rather it presents expressions of adults, who are no longer children, attempting to 'speak for' them. Then, it goes without saying that it mirrors values and images assembled by adults and transmitted to the children. Though the kids may not be passive consumers of these values and images, as the literature is authoritative, it imposes some values on them and shapes their worldview. Hunt elaborates this point saying:

Children's literature is invariably a communication from the experienced adult to the inexperienced child and this relationship means that children's books constitute a powerful and important literature [2].

It is powerful because it has the capacity to shape them in a way adults construct. The importance, here, begs for paying attention to the usually overlooked part of this literary polysystem. One can also link the importance to the fact that children's literature presents issues of critical concern in a culture. Such nature of the literature makes it susceptible to ideological indoctrination. As the texts are targeted at socializing the children, values filtered through imagination of the authors are incorporated in the works. Hence, the appropriation of ideologies of power and gender becomes evident in the production of children's literature.

Children are constructed through the narratives as subjects expected to occupy a certain position deemed to be appropriate in the culture. The imposition, though implicit, goes as far as making children stereotyped members of the culture. Through the stories, children are put to sleep figuratively with tales of powerful kings and obedient servants, and beautiful but weak princesses waiting to be rescued by some powerful and heroic prince [3]. They are taught which part is appropriate for them to play, and cautioned against the punishments awaiting rebellious characters. What follows from this is that they are finally led to accepting their roles for granted [4].

In literature, ideology is coded in linguistic expressions and language choice that authors make to describe events, characters, and their relationship can help create and maintain values, beliefs and relations of power [5]. Seen from this angle, all writings are ideological, since they either assume values, or are produced and read within a social and cultural framework which in itself is inevitably suffused with values. Studying children's literature should then take into account the values being encoded in the texts to imaginatively create a possible world for children.

This study discusses how children's literature in Ethiopia is used in appropriating power and gender ideologies. It has become imperative to take up the task of analyzing the poetics of power and gender identity construction in the literature for there is apparently little enquiry in the area.

As critics of children's literature argue, the fact that it is a contested site of socializing children makes children's literature a vibrant concern of ideological analysis [6]. The difference in power between the adult writer and the child consumer also makes children's literature an important site of power discourse as it involves "a question of politics" [7]. As a result, it is imperative to delve into this unexplored seam in Ethiopian children's literature to highlight on how the poetics of power and the construction of gender identity are represented in the works.

In its attempt to delve into the political and gender ideology in selected Ethiopian children's literature published in Amharic, the study has attempted to answer the following questions:

- A. How does children's literature in Ethiopia construct/inscribe gender identity?
- B. How is the discourse of power represented in the children's literature?

The investigation is delimited to selected recent children's literature books published in Amharic. To get access to the representation of subject positions, among the various genres in children's literature the researchers focused on narratives. Ideological motifs observed in children's literature could be many, but this study focused on those pertaining to representation of political power and gender. The subject positions the texts offer, overt or implicit, in the language of the texts are important points of focus.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1 Children's Literature as 'Ideological Minefield'

Children's literature arises as a discursive practice from a distinct cultural context. It is produced by the adults, as Zipes argues, to inculcate mores, values and manners of the adults so that they are shaped in line with the social code of the culture [8]. In other words, it is a site for production and circulation of social ideals. As a result, children's literature is ideological and transmits ideology of the adults to the children. In this line, Hunt argues that, "Children's literature is a powerful literature, and ... such a power cannot be neutral or innocent, or trivial." He goes on to describe children's fiction as, "an ideological minefield." [2].

All literature is ideological in that language and ideology are inextricably intertwined. Stephens explains the inherent nature of ideology in discourses which use language saying: "language as a system of signification - what is commonly referred to as *discourse* - is endemically and pervasively imbued with ideology..." [9] This implies that language itself is the carrier of ideology and so, "a narrative without ideology is unthinkable: ideology is formulated in and by language, meanings within language are socially determined, and narratives are constructed out of language" [9]. In this respect, even the simplest language found in literature is loaded with social and political significance on some level.

As a carrier of ideology, literature has the power to persuade and change perspectives and beliefs. It is based on such a nature of literature that Stephens asserts, "fiction must be regarded as a special site for ideological effect, with a potentially powerful capacity for shaping audience attitudes." [9] There is no literature which is neutral, innocent or free of an ideological position in the same way that no people could be described as free of ideology. Indeed as Carter and Nash explain, "Ideologies impregnate a society's mode of thinking, speaking, experiencing

and behaving....” [10]. The presence of ideology in all texts is also indicated by Reynolds (1994:9) in the statement about it that “...it is important to remember that *all texts are ideological...*” (*Emphasis added*)

Two main reasons are usually forwarded as to why the analysis of ideology in children's literature should get attention. The first is that children's books have been seen as a site of socialization [11]. Adults may use children's literature as a way of introducing societal formalities to a young audience to ensure that this manner of behavior is carried forth into the next generation. Stories always take place within the world to which a child is socialized. Even in fantasy where an author writes an adventure in another world altogether, it is difficult to escape the values, routines or institutions which make the society function. The second reason is attributed to the invariably unequal power relationship between the reader and the writer when it comes to literature for children. Sarland elaborates this point as follows:

Since there is an imbalance of power between the children and young people who read the books, and the adults who write, publish and review the books, or who are otherwise engaged in commentary upon or dissemination of the books, either as parents, or teachers, or librarians, or booksellers, or academics, there is here immediately a question of politics, a politics first and foremost of age differential [7].

It should be made clear, here, that the socialization through children's literature does not mean that all the ideologies conform to the practices of the day. As indicated by Stephens, it could be a subversive ideology transmitted through the literature: “...which can mean either an attempt to perpetuate certain values or to resist socially dominant values which particular writers oppose” [9].

According to Hollindale, ideology operates on three levels, which he terms as ‘explicit’, ‘passive’ and ‘inherent’. Reference [12] explicit that one is the kind of ideology that we can easily identify [9], it is overt and the author is aware of its presence. This type of ideology is largely present in 'books which advocate 'progressive' or 'enlightened' ideas' [11]. It is this kind of ideology that is easy to observe in early children's literature which was very often deliberately didactic.

The second type of ideology is that which the author is not necessarily aware of. This is the most powerful type of ideology. It is the “implicit presence in the text of the writer's unexamined assumptions” [9]. This ideology may be virtually impossible to observe especially in contemporary texts where the values expressed by the author are in line with our own. Reynolds says: “If we fail to notice the ideological stance of a contemporary text, it is because its messages are in accordance with our own point of view and therefore seem natural” [13]. This type of ideology is very powerful in that it subconsciously penetrates every level of a text.

The third type of ideology is that which is inherent within language. It is similar to passive ideology in that it is not a conscious product of the imagination. It is differentiated from passive ideology in that it is found within “the codes which constitute the text”, rather than the unconscious assumptions of the author's and the reader's values [9]. This type of ideology is similarly difficult to perceive because it is imbued in the text. As children's books have been used as a means of socializing readers or as Stephens says, to 'mould' audience attitudes into 'desirable' forms, we must consider authorial intention with caution.

The notion of ideology has been brought into play in the service of numerous scholarly pursuits. Literature is one of the sites where ideology is manifested and circulated. As provided by Marxist scholars, literature is the product of the “ideological conditions of the time and place in which it was written” [14]. It is not something that originates from a vacuum; rather, it is situated in the spacio-temporal contexts of its production manifesting the culture that constructs it. According to Thompson, the effort of understanding ideology is targeted at understanding “the ways in which meaning serves to establish and sustain relations of domination” [15].

The structured social relationships between adults and children in the settings of home, school, secular and religious clubs is one of the areas in which relations of domination is observed. In this relationship, the adults establish a structure that maintains the relationship. By virtue of their greater experience, adults are more powerful than children socially, economically and physically. Due to such a privilege, they train the children through various ways to “behave in the ways that are generally acceptable to adults” [16]. This imposition of values is usually done through several means overtly through application of coercion and reward, or subtly through the use of language.

From Marxist perspective, children’s literature has an ideological function of social control. Both Zipes and Richards argue that children’s literature is appropriated by the ruling class as a site for the production of ruling class ideologies [8, 17]. But children's literature writers do not always comply with ruling-class ideas, even when they come from the ruling class. Hence, they may support or subvert the ruling-class ideologies. As a result, by analyzing power relations in the stories, and the narrative point of view, it is possible to arrive at the power ideology (political ideologies) of the texts.

2.2 Gender Ideology and Children’s Literature: a Feminist Perspective

Feminist criticism examines gender politics in literary works and traces the subtle construction of masculinity and femininity, and their relative status, positioning, and marginalization within the works. Through all kinds of external stimuli, children are constructed as boys and girls who behave in ways appropriate to their sex. Thus, gender differences and hierarchy between sexes are imposed on children right from the beginning. Literature is one of the most effective means contributing to this process of appropriation.

By means of stories children learn which part they should play throughout their lives and are warned against the punishments awaiting those who rebel. For instance, it is common to find in oral narratives a stereotyped form of gender representation. Thus, if a female is passive, lethargic and dependent, then she is regarded as good and beautiful. This idea is imposed on human beings in their early childhood through these stories.

As Zipes suggests “whenever a woman in a fairy tale possesses or acts with power, she acts in favor of the patriarchy”. Reference [8] Good women are never active and never have power; they are obedient wives who depend on their heroes for survival. Female children reading these stories would never question the fixed roles, but accept them as they are. The case is similar with boys as well. They are always expected to be the breadwinners, the heroes who never cry, who are never frightened and who should always take the first step. While good women are submissive and religious, men are ‘good’ when they are aggressive, handsome, wealthy

and powerful: “The male as savior is dominant and protects the virtues of the humble female” [8]. The male are the heroes that always conclude the stories.

Literature is one subtle means of gender stereotyping. As Coltrane suggests, the analysis of gender identity construction in children’s literature should focus on looking at “who gets to be the hero and who needs rescuing” [18] to understand the ideology at work. As a result, through analyzing roles assigned to characters, structure of the story and narrative voice, one may arrive at the ideologies inherent, explicit or implicit in the texts.

3. Methodology and Procedures of Analysis

3.1 Nature of the Data

This study is a critical textual analysis aiming at the exploration of indoctrination of ideological motifs in recent Ethiopian children’s literature. Therefore, the primary data for the investigation is published children’s literature in Amharic. The selection of the texts has been undertaken based on the kind of motifs they embody and the reoccurrence of values which the study seeks to explore. So, texts presenting the operation of ideology in relations of power and gender identity have been considered. These points of focus have been selected owing to their prevalent existence and critical importance in the shaping of subjectivities, which later makes the subjects (children) act in the way they are shaped in their early training (ideological indoctrination) by the adults.

To this end, fifteen books from the works of different authors have been consulted to explore the motifs. In addition to what is presented in the proper literary works, the researchers looked at the blurbs and introductory remarks given on the covers and initial pages of the books to understand the importance the writers and publishers accord to the kind of children’s literature presented in the books. The data gained through critical inspection of the texts have been analyzed based on the framework indicated below. More than fifty stories have been considered in the study, but the analysis presented here focused only on those stories which recurrently address the issues at stake in the study.

3.2 Framework of Analysis

As a critical enterprise, the study employs two theories of literary analysis which emphasize on the working of power in the construction and maintaining of ideology. These are: Marxism and Feminism. That is, to investigate ideologies pertaining to representation of political power the texts offer, the study employed Marxist perspective; and to analyze those pertaining to the construction of gender identity, it follows the Feminist perspective. Put together, these perspectives render the ideological motif at work in the texts written by adults to construct a child self.

Using these theoretical perspectives, subject positions of characters and narrators in the stories have been analyzed through the tools of *point of view*, *focalization*, *narrative voice* and use of *language*. The narrative voice reveals narrator’s/character’s presentation of issues about children with regard to the working of power and the place of children in it. Point of view reveals the angle from which the texts are constructed, and the

representations are embodied (adult, child, man, woman, etc.). Focalization is an important tool to see the subject positions that the texts offer. It reveals the role of focalizers in guiding and determining what should be presented to the reader. And lastly, the use of language (diction and figurative instruments) can serve as points of entry for the analysis of the symbolic representations infused with values.

The framework applied in this study then blends the two theoretical perspectives and narrative strategies to see how the child self is constructed from the position of adults in the literary works.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Analysis of Poetics of Power in the Texts

In this section, focus has been given on how ideology of power works passively by analyzing rhetoric of power symbolically presented in the texts.

4.1.1 Power Structure and Actors in the Discourse

Children's literature considered in this study offer similar context of power structure and actors at each level of structure in the imaginative world. Understanding the operation of power involves understanding the kind of relation held as 'normal' in the contexts of the stories. The stories considered in this section mostly speak about animals, and it is only rarely that they involve human actors. But in the imaginative animal world depicted in the stories, a human system of power structure guides the lives of the animals. Hence, the stories provide symbolic/metaphorical representation of power system through the use of animal imagery.

The power structure observed in Ethiopian children's literature offers the position of feudalistic political tendency. All human and animal actors/characters in the stories are either kings/queens (masters, landlords) or servants (tenants, slaves). The upper class is all entitled to exploit and oppress the subjects (lower class) which are destined to live under their rule. In the animal empire as well, we see the muscular animals holding the position of human kings, running for political power and doing all the injustices that the human kings enjoy doing in the stories. They are feared, mystified and at times worshiped by their subjects. In the story entitled “ሆዳሙ ጅብ እና ሌሎችም የአያ ጅቦች ታሪኮች/ the greedy hyena and other stories about hyena” [19] for instance, the structure of power is divided into two class positions: the powerful few and the powerless multitude.

In his campaign for political power, the hyena, who is attempting to join the upper class (a position reserved for the lion), threatens his subjects to vote for his ascendance to power. In the inherent ideology of the story, the position he is attempting to hold is given to the lion through what Stephens calls 'naturalization' [9], as hyena belongs to the powerless class. The story shows the impossibility of grabbing power from the powerful, and the hyena fails at last. The hyena used the mechanism of instigating fear on the powerless and at times tricking them. The other animals (his subjects) cannot avoid it as they are destined to be at the position they were relegated to.

A similar relation of power is observed in the story “the powerful Docho”, [20] which presents an account of a

powerful monkey exploiting his subjects. He came to power at his will through force. The narrator presents the asymmetrical relation of power between *Docho* and other monkeys. *Docho's* position is inaccessible and his power is unlimited that he exploits the other class at his will. Those who go astray from the orders and regulations he put forward are severely punished, and mostly because of this punishment they flee from the territory.

In the folktale taken from a region of the country published in the book ተረጎ ተረጎ (Mega 2000), the class structure maintains the asymmetrical relations of power. The king of the land in the story “ሎኦ ወጃሽ/ *Lo'eto and her puppy*” is autocratic and his orders are unquestionably accepted. Every person addresses the king as ‘lord’ and ‘master’ and has to beg for his mercy. *Lo'eto's* father is evicted from his land just because the king did not feel comfortable with how the man was developing his plot of land. The king was begged by some elders to spare the man, but mercy was not granted. Lower-class people like *Lo'eto's* father have to suffer without any wrong doing because the power of the king is cannot be challenged.

Kings are mystified and their power remains unquestionable in all the stories considered in this analysis. It is observed in some of the characters that the mystification has been internalized. In a story that narrates about the journey of a king, and a herd girl who was inspecting the journey from the bush, an ideology which mystifies and asserts the superiority of kings is imparted. The lady's assumption that the feces of king must be different from other people affirms the passive ideology shaping her imagination about the powerful. She expected the excretion of the king to be gold. It is only after she saw it that she confirmed to herself a king is like any other human. But that ideology was not silenced there and it appeared again when she found out the king's toothbrush. The narrator presents that this character gets astonished at what she found giving it a supernatural quality.

The power structure and preponderance of kings and servants as the only actors in the social system depicted in the fictional worlds indoctrinate readers to asymmetrical relation of power as they restrict the horizon of power relation to classist values. The subject positions offered to child readers by the narrators and characters in the stories tend to shape the minds to master-servant relations of power, maintaining the status quo.

4.1.2 Fear as a Tool of Political Ambition

Running for political office is one of the common motifs in the stories studied for analysis. In an attempt to grab power, the characters in the stories apply fear as a strategy. In the story considered above (the political campaign of hyena), the instigation of fear on the subjects is a major strategy employed. The campaign begins from the weak and powerless animals which are thought to have no power of resisting/opposing claims made by the powerful hyena.

The narrator makes it explicit that the hyena followed the strategy of convincing the vulnerable first and avoiding potential threat. Animals like donkey, sheep, goat, and pig easily fall to his proposal for fear of consequences of protest. The cultural/ natural enmity (predator-prey relation) is a given context which locates readers to the approval of triumph of the powerful hyena in his campaign. The politics of power which this narrative offers socializes child readers to the ideology of the triumph of the powerful over the vulnerable even

through unjust means.

The politics of inciting fear worked well for the hyena as matured animals approved his ascendancy to power though they know he is not a legitimate king of the jungle. The narrator presents “ነገር ከሚመጣ ብለው ንጉሳችን መሆን ያለብህ አንተ ነህ አሉ”/“Because they feared the consequence of refusing the approval, they [the animals] responded [to the hyena] ‘you should be our rightful king’” [20]. The predator-prey relation imposes a passive submission to the claim of power. Had it not been for the established context of asymmetrical power relation, the animals would have resisted hyena’s claim to rule over them. The ironic nature of their response is revealed when the power discourse turns to its legitimate owner. The lion, the legitimate king of the jungle in the discourse of the story, appears at the coronation ceremony prepared by the hyena, and turns everything that he has constructed to dust. At that moment, the animals invited to the ceremony recognized the ‘real’ king.

The story of the powerful monkey “*docho*” also reveals the use of fear as a strategy to achieve political ambition. Other monkeys are left with no chance of protest against the totalitarian and oppressive rule of ‘*docho*’. He appointed himself as a governor of the group through his muscle power. For fear of punishment inflicted on them, they always do whatever is ordered from the king though it involves a deadly risk. Unsuccessful endeavor in accomplishing the tasks is always followed by punishment, let alone the protest. Fear governs their daily activity and the maximum thing that the subjects do is leave the area to avoid the punishment. The exercise of power through physical attack, and not through logic, dominates the discourses pertaining to power in the story.

In similar fashion, the folktale about *Lo’eto* also harbors the instrumentality of fear as a strategy of maintaining power and regulating power relation. The king is the most feared and respected person in the world of the story. His orders are always unquestionable and should be met with positive intentions. *Lo’eto*’s father left his land because the king sent a message threatening to punish him by setting fire to his property.

4.1.3 Passive Resistance against Ills of Power

The discourse of power in the narratives reveals not only the domination model of the structure and strategies used to maintain power. There are alternative representations which give readers a different subject position. In this section, motifs pertaining to resistance against ills of power and assertion of the doomed fate of exploiters are analyzed.

Children’s stories considered in this analysis present troubles of power inflicted on lower class by the powerful. In the story that narrates about *Docho* the narrator presents the troubling nature of governance which the powerful monkey followed. The exercise of dictatorial power on the subjects was beyond what they could bear. The exploitation starts from the first day of his ascendance to power. The subjects are made to risk their life in the service of the king of the group. They did not openly resist against this maltreatment, but fled from the area. The form of resistance that they followed is passive, but finally fated to the doom of the oppressor.

All the animals in the story appear to have become fade-up of exploitation, and hold grudge about their subordination though they failed to take arms against the exploiter for fear of risk. When all fled from the place,

Docho was left with no one to help him with his life of luxury. At this instance, the motif of ensnaring the exploiter is introduced by the narrator. When the monkey goes to the human farm to look for food, it was captured by a snare. The risk which the other monkeys attempted to avoid finally falls on their exploiter. Then, the monkey is made to experience the problem to pay the price of his brutal mistreatment. The tribulation did not end there, as the narrator lets *Docho* experience more ills in the hands of his subjects to finally regret his actions. He was severely beaten by those who fled from the area. The implied reader is made to side with the subjected animals at this moment because of the justice made to the weak at last through the punishment of the dictator.

Passive resistance in this story embeds political passivity which is a refrain from fighting to change the situation for fear of attack. Though the suffering was unbearable, the animals did not attempt to change the course of power, the dictator is fated to fall, and people had to be patient about the day when this is materialized. Such an attitude comes from the cultural expectation that all will receive what they deserve from some force according to their deeds. The intervention is expected from other bodies (divine or otherwise). In this story, the intervention comes from the human which are thought to be super animal. The dynamics of power has to be regulated through that way and it seems to suggest that people should shun away from taking an active role in toppling dictators.

In similar fashion, there is no direct resistance to the hyena from the vulnerable animals and they have to submit themselves to his requests at ease for fear of punishment. But the monkey, which holds a different position of power to the prey due to its capacity to save itself from the attack of the hyena, is seen to resist and shun his kingship. For other animals, some sort of intervention must come to silence the hyena, which is the lion, considered as a legitimate king of the jungle. The hyena is fated to fall from the beginning as he was attempting to put himself in a place that it does not deserve. The lion appears and affirms that it is the rightful king. In this story as well, the passive nature of the masses is affirmed even when the brutal kings are exploiting them callously. These stories position the readers in the location of passive actors subscribing to a common ideology in the service of the ruling class.

Based on the analysis and discussion made above, one may conclude here that the power discourse understood from the narratives reveal the use of children's literature as a site for ideology in the making. Feudalistic social structure and asymmetrical power relation maintained in the stories seem to go against the interest of the day and locate the children to the despotic system of power relationship. The instigation of fear and its use as a tool towards ascendance of power and the passive strategies the characters are following in the regulation of power provides a subject position enclosed in the governing system. It fosters the subscription of young minds to the common ideology of the untouchable nature of political power.

4.2 Construction of Gender Identities

Following the feminist framework of analyzing gender values, an attempt has been made to dig into the subtle constructions of masculinity and femininity offered in the texts. Here, emphasis is given to the relative status given to men and women, their positioning and marginalization.

4.2.1 Gender Roles as Marks of Identity

Children's stories in the books considered for analysis present feminine and masculine values differently and reveal a subtle gender stereotyping. They present fixed roles for both females and males. The female protagonists in the stories are seen to be enticed with traditional roles. The usual roles they are assigned to and good at performing or being, include: being house wives, skill in cooking food, nurturing their husbands and kids, washing clothes, etc which are all traditional roles of Ethiopian women. A good woman is the one who does such activities and act according to these standards.

Contrary to that males have independent roles which affirm their superior position. They engage in income earning economic activities and win bread for the family. They are teachers, traders, doctors, government office workers, etc which are represented in the story as source of their pride. The women have to depend on them and the boys are always advised to follow their father's footsteps. Such delineation shapes the children to a biased gender identity. The roles and qualities attributed to the women are all fetched from the cultural underpinnings. Socializing the children to such biased figuration of the women is sustaining the patriarchal values by inculcating them silently to the young minds.

Such delineation is seen in all the stories involving female and male characters. The story “*የአቶ ለማና የማንደፍሮ ጠብ*” *Mr. Lemma's and Mandefro's conflict*, [21] for instance, is infused with biased sex-roles. The story begins with defining the role of the male and the female figures, and concludes with a kind of naturalizing these roles. In Alem's translated story of “*Snow White*” [22], the female protagonist is defined with traditional gender roles. In Abayneh's collection of translated stories “*የልጆች አለም*” /*children's world* [23] as well males are given heroic quality while women are represented as passive.

Female characters in the stories are considered good if they are passive, indolent, sanctimonious and dependent. Such biased gender stereotype is imposed on the children when they are so young through the stories. They are taught the lesson that while the female should remain passive and wait for their deliverance from the heroic acts of the boys, males should always acts to save the world. Child bearing is one of the main features that define female characters in the stories. In the story that narrates about *Lo'eto* and her puppy women are valued only when they bear child. A woman who is unable to bear a child is not worthy of any respect and is divorced at the will of the husband. That is what the king did in the story. He banned his infertile wife to marry a woman who can give him child.

4.2.2 Imprisoning Women in their Bodies: Valuable are the Beautiful

In most narratives contained in the children's literature books female characters are portrayed based on their physique. Their significance lies on their being physically attractive. The story of “*ጃሄሌ*”/*Jahese*, [24] a folktale from Benishangul Gumuz (an administrative region in Ethiopia) narrates a situation where the protagonist becomes victimized because of her beauty. She lost her mother when she was only 14 years old, and her father had to marry another woman. The stepmother (*Ekwe*) mistreats her every day and she is always troubled about that.

The story presents the mythical beauty of the lady portraying her as a source of male chivalry. Attracted by her enticing beauty, the boys always trouble her for making her their own possession. She marries one of them to just free herself from the mistreatment of her stepmother. The beauty which makes her the center of attraction among the boys is a source of conflict at home as the stepmother envies her beauty for the sake of her own daughter (*Emecho*). Competition over marrying the boys seem to be established between the two ladies and the mother sides her own daughter which according to the narrator is not as beautiful as *Jahese*.

The narrator of the story locates readers in the discourse of imprisoning the ladies in their bodies. The story approves the ideological explanation that physical beauty is a natural assumption rightly appropriated to the defining identity of women. Besides, the story presents women as good and valuable only when they are beautiful and are able to accomplish household works perfectly. This assumption comes from the cultural standards which guide the construction of the story. Children reading this story are positioned in valuing female characters from the 'beauty myth' perspective and that form of understanding becomes latent.

Other stories also depict the female characters from the same stand point that which position the readers at the center of the patriarchal ideological plane. In the story of "*Snow white and Rose*" in the collection of translated works by Alem, the description given about the two women emphasizes on their physical appearance. All that matters is their beauty.

The beauty of women is followed by their marriage to a hero or prince who is enticed by their beauty. Girls are associated with the beauty of their mother and boys are to the heroic quality of their fathers. A story in the translation works of Alem portrays this phenomenon, presenting the story of a hero skilled in hunting trying to bring up his boy in his ways [21]. The mother is told to raise him to become a hunter like his father. The story works towards that end and the boy becomes a famous hunter in the area after his father, frees a woman enslaved by a most feared witch in the forest, an act his father was unable to do. The fact that the heroic deeds of the boy saves the woman asserts the gender ideology of weakness of women as she is rescued through the agency of the hero. Children reading the story are made to internalize the feeble nature of women and a strong and redeeming quality of men.

What the women are good at is only ensnaring the boys with their enticing beauty. The narrator describes that the hunter fall in love with the woman enslaved by the witch and proposed marriage after freeing her because of irresistible beauty. The female body is sexualized and their identity is defined only from that perspective. In other stories as well the girls win the boys because of their beauty.

When they are not portrayed as physically beautiful, the women are represented as witches or assistants/slaves of witches. These witches are adversaries of heroic men and they either mistreat them or attempt to kill princes. But who triumphs at last is the boys. In the story "*The two brothers and the witch woman*" in the book "*Snow white*" [21] we recognize such feature in the discourse of gender identity construction. The same is true in the story accounting about a frog and princess in the book "*የልጅጅ ልላም*". In the narrative, the princess failed to fulfill her promise of befriending the frog who got her golden ball back from where she lost it. In the course of the story, she becomes convinced of keeping her promise and befriends the frog. The frog then turns into a

handsome prince and instantly the princess becomes happy about how events turned out to be. The boy became a frog first because of a certain witch who was angered at him for he loved and talked to her beautiful daughter. A man advised him to get a kiss from a beautiful princess to get back to normal. And now that happened because the princess kissed him.

Other translated works like “*Snow white and the forty dwarfs*” also affirm that beauty matters as the defining feature of female characters (Snow white, her mother and the queen). The new queen is obsessed with her beauty and the king is lured by her beauty. The king fails to interfere in the conflict between his daughter and the new queen because he was overtaken by the beauty of the lady. The beauty competition that the queen put herself to leads her to the attempt to kill Snow White through her servants, but she was spared because of her beauty as well. She finds the house of the forty dwarfs and through serving them in the house hold chores befriends them. Then, a prince comes and saves this lady from death through the poisoning of the stepmother by kissing her. He falls in love with her and marries her. The course of the story portrays the patriarchal gender ideology which imprisons women in their physical body.

4.2.3 Voices of Resistance: Confronting Customary Gender Roles

Not all stories in Ethiopian children’s literature books present an affirmation and sustaining of traditional gender values. Some stories present a challenge to the assumptions held in the above analysis. In the book, “*የጭለፊ ጥፊ እና ሌሎች የሀፃናት ታሪኮች*”/ ‘*The slap of the Eagle and Other stories for Children*’, [25] the story entitled “*የማይሰራ አይበላም*”/‘*The Idle should not eat*’ presents a challenge to the traditional feminine roles assigned to women by a patriarchal culture.

This story is about a matriarchal family, in which a mother lives with her three sons and only daughter. The mother of these kids toils every day to take care of her children. She is represented as an industrious woman devoted to the upbringing of her children. She wins bread for the family by working day and night. Though the roles the woman is involved in are all the traditional ones: collecting firewood, spinning cotton and other household chores which restrict the world of woman to kitchen and household matters, she is portrayed as a being that can independently run her family business. No male figure is seen to help her, an odd phenomena one might observe in the abundance of dependent women seen in other stories.

Similar to her mother, the daughter (*Nigatua*) is represented as diligent, while the three sons are given the quality of indolence. The only thing that the three boys are good at is playing in the field with their friends of neighborhood. The daughter helps her mother with her works, while the boys always look for reasons not to give a hand. It is the daughter who helps her mother with fetching water from the river, going to market and cooking food. The two females have to toil every day to accomplish all it needs to take and sustain the life of the family. The boys just consume.

The story presents a subject position that challenges the association usually made between daughters and mothers on the inevitability of the traditional roles by exposing the idle and parasitic nature of the boys. Children (readers) are made to criticize the position held by the boys through the narrator’s sympathetic view of

the two females. The story says the boys should not eat because they did not contribute anything. The punishment used against the boys by prohibiting them from eating due to their unwillingness to help their mother can be seen as an intervention used by the narrator to challenge the patriarchal claim of gender roles. If the narrative ends in a way that all the family eats together (with boys consuming the food without contributing like their sister did), it would have become an assertion of the traditional role. As a result the ending presents a challenge to the traditional assumption.

5. Conclusion

This study focused on a critical analysis of selected children's literature in Ethiopia published in Amharic. The goal of the study is to reveal the poetics/politics of power embedded in the stories, and to decipher the way gender is constructed in the stories. To this end the framework that helps in digging into the political ideologies and gender stereotypes has been employed by bringing together the Marxist and Feminist perspectives. The analysis conducted reveals that ideological positioning pertaining to power in the stories is consistent in its imposing of hierarchal and oppressive system of symbolic governance which the children are meant to embrace passively. Characters in the stories belong either to superior classes, represented as entitled to do whatever they will, or to inferior classes who are fated to live under autocracy of the governors. As a result, the stories appear to normalize class structure (power belongs only to the powerful). The construction of gender identity represented in the texts considered for analysis appears to be conflicted but dominantly influenced by patriarchy which offers child readers to passively inherit the gender bias. Though at times traditional gender roles are deconstructed, mostly, the narratives' definition of women succumbs to the patriarchal perspective. Women appear valuable only when they are physically attractive. The cognition, tactics, and muscular power and authority which define male characters are not seen in the women. The perspectives from which the women are seen and the perspective through which they see themselves and others remains restricted to the 'beauty myth'.

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